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RULSDMK/DEPT OF TRANSPORTATION WASHINGTON DC
RUEANHA/FAA WASHDC
RUCPDO/DEPT OF COMMERCE WASHDC
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 1475
RHEHAAA/WHITE HOUSE WASHINGTON DC
RUEAHLA/HOMELAND SECURITY WASHDC

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 MONROVIA 001033

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STATE PASS TO FAA FOR AHARRIS, TO DHS/TSA FOR BMCLAUGHLIN
DAKAR PLEASE PASS TO FAA REP MKEANE
ROME PLEASE PASS TO TSA REP JHALINSKI
DEPARTMENT FOR AF/W AOKEDEJI, AF/EPS CTRIMBLE, EB/ESC
SSAARNIO, INR/AA BGRAVES, EB/TRA/OTP JEMERY AND KGUSTAVSON

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [FAIR](#) [ECON](#) [PGOV](#) [FAA](#) [LI](#)

SUBJECT: LIBERIA: REQUEST FOR AIRPORT SURVEY AND ASSISTANCE

1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Since signing an Open Skies agreement with the United States in February 2007, the Government of Liberia (GOL) is eager to initiate direct air service between the United States and Liberia. However, the security, safety, systems, and immigration shortfalls at the Robertsfield International Airport (RIA) outside Monrovia remain a formidable challenge for the initiation of non-stop flights to and from the United States. Some improvements are underway to address these issues but it is unlikely these will be sufficient to meet even minimum standards required by U. S. aviation authorities and airlines. Post requests assistance from the Federal Aviation Authority (FAA), the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), and the Transportation Safety Agency (TSA) to assess the status and needs of the RIA and Liberian Civil Aviation Authority (LCAA) with an eye towards preparing Liberia for potential direct air service to the United States. END SUMMARY.

Demand for flights is expanding

2. (U) President Johnson Sirleaf has stated publicly and privately on numerous occasions that she is eager to initiate direct air service between the United States and Liberia. The GOL signed an Open Skies agreement in February 2007 and the President has personally encouraged U.S. carriers (namely Delta Airlines) to examine flights to Monrovia in addition to their other direct routes to West Africa (Delta currently flies to Accra and Dakar and will begin service to Lagos in December). Direct service to the United States would cut travel time and cost significantly, encouraging trade and investment.

3. (U) There are currently a handful of regional flights to/from Monrovia each week on African carriers such as SLOK, Bellevue, and Kenya Airways, as well as three flights a week to Belgium on Brussels Airlines (via Dakar) and one flight a week to London on charter carrier Astreus Airlines. RIA Managing Director Abraham Simmons told the Ambassador July 19 that he has received inquiries from several airlines interested in servicing Monrovia, including Ethiopian Airlines, KLM, Virgin Atlantic, Delta, and Continental. Simmons expects the RIA's current passenger load of 69,000 passengers per year to increase to 90,000 by 2010.

Monrovia International Airport's Problems

¶4. (SBU) At present, however, the security, safety and operational deficiencies of the RIA deter any general expansion of service, and direct flights to the United States in particular. Outside advisors contracted by USAID tell the Embassy that RIA does not meet even minimum safety requirements: inadequate fire and rescue equipment, no functioning ambulance, and almost no safety procedures or training of airport personnel. In addition, they note that RIA's insurance is capped at \$10 million, an amount that would be wiped out with even one minor mishap. RIA does have an informal agreement with the United Nations contingent at the airport for basic fire and rescue, and with the nearby Firestone Rubber Plantation hospital for ambulance and medical facilities, but the airport is unable at present to provide these services itself.

¶5. (SBU) Flight and ground handling systems are equally frail. In July, the lighting system, including approach lights and runway lights, were cut by deliberate sabotage, forcing the commercial airlines to operate in and out of RIA according to restricted, daylight and visibility dependent procedures. These basic systems have since been repaired, but the airport still lacks functional guidance systems such as the Very High Frequency Omni Directional Radio Range (DVOR), Distance Measuring Equipment (DME), and Glide Path (GP).

¶6. (SBU) Security at the airport is improving but remains lax. The United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) provides

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perimeter security, but there are relatively easy access points throughout, and loose control over official airport personnel. RIA does not possess an x-ray machine, a scanner, or a dangerous goods expert. Personnel trained by Brussels Airlines have suitable training in security screening, but the RIA employees have not been adequately trained. Immigration officials continue to keep only paper records, photocopying and filing copies of all passports and passenger cards, and inputting only basic information on an Excel spreadsheet.

¶7. (SBU) Simmons and other top managers at RIA are capable and well-intentioned, but lack experienced section heads and the resources to implement any of the easily identifiable safety and security priorities. At present, the fifteen dollar "security fee" charged to each ticket flows directly to the LCAA rather than RIA. According to the U.S.-funded GEMAP advisor to the RIA, that fee amounts to roughly \$1.2 million in revenue per year that could be spent on security upgrades, but thus far the RIA has not received any funding from the LCAA for this purpose. RIA revenues from other fees and handling charges total roughly \$3.5 million per year, but most is expended on overhead, mainly salaries. Simmons plans to undertake a second round of staff rightsizing to remove 46 unqualified and unnecessary people from the books. At present the RIA has only \$450,000 in the bank.

Plans for improvement are progressing

¶8. (U) Donors have recognized these deficiencies and the vital role that RIA plays and have funded many needed improvements. USAID is funding \$3 million in emergency works and safety equipment, including an airport ramp, generators, information technology upgrades, fire and rescue equipment, and air handling systems, in addition to a full-time management consultant funded under the GEMAP program. USAID/OTI has also funded short term consultants to produce an operations manual with procedures for each department and \$350,000 worth of training for airport personnel.

Specifications for the equipment will be complete and bid documentation prepared by September, and the operations manual is expected to be complete later in the fall.

¶9. (U) The World Bank is procuring and installing some of the navigational, aeronautical and meteorological equipment that has been missing. The \$600,000 contract has been awarded and the contractor is scheduled to arrive in August to begin implementation. All the equipment is expected to be operational in 6-9 months, according to Simmons. Meanwhile, UNMIL has promised to provide a ring road and additional fencing around the perimeter of the airport. The GOL included \$250,000 in its 2007-08 budget for renovations to the airport terminal itself, and the contractor has completed the first phase of the work. Simmons has suggested other needs such as an upgrade to the radio navigation system and runway resurfacing, while USAID advisors say there is a long list of requirements to be addressed for the RIA to meet FAA and TSA standards.

¶10. (U) The International Office of Migration (IOM) is assisting the Ministry of Justice to build capacity in the Bureau of Immigration and Naturalization (BIN). IOM is training officers regarding fraudulent documents and impostor recognition, and is seeking to implement a Passenger Immigration Registration System (PIRS) passport scanner and information management system to automate border and airport operations. IOM says PIRS can work with DHS watchlists. The Dutch government came to Liberia in June to seek a way to assist BIN with transformation as part of their long-standing program of cooperation with other West African countries in this area. USAID/OTI is assisting the often troubled passport office at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the GOL is in the process of revamping the Liberian passport to make it machine readable.

Further guidance and assistance is required

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¶11. (U) There is much political will but very little capacity and financial support to do what it takes to make the RIA meet FAA safety and TSA/DHS security standards. The Airport Director largely understands the needs, and top managers are qualified and capable, but capacity in the ranks is thin and funding is scarce. Although donors are doing what they can to help airport authorities address emergency priorities, the LCAA and RIA require guidance to evaluate their work plans and identify gaps in strategy. Post requests assistance from the FAA, TSA and DHS to survey the current condition of the airport and advise the GOL and donors on the steps necessary to prepare the RIA and related authorities for the possibility of direct flights to/from the United States.

Booth